

16

AMENDMENT TO THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES—WOMAN SUFFRAGE

The issue is fundamental. Shall it be postponed by the exertion of the procrastinating power of the House, or shall we rend this ragged remnant of the mantle of despotism from our unwilling shoulders?

SPEECH

OF

HON. J. THOMPSON BAKER
OF NEW JERSEY

IN THE

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

JANUARY 12, 1915



WASHINGTON
1915

77778—14426



SPEECH
OF
HON. J. THOMPSON BAKER,
OF NEW JERSEY.

The House had under consideration the joint resolution (H. J. Res. 1) proposing an amendment to the Constitution of the United States extending the right of suffrage to women.

Mr. BAKER. Mr. Speaker, it is probably true that few people who think do not believe that the greatest stiffener in self-respect and quickener in diligence for duty is the consciousness that one has the right to provide by law for personal security. It has been said here, or words to that effect, that if women are allowed to vote they will neglect their work. Is that so with men, since they can vote? It is said, further, that if women vote, they will become wrangling politicians and get themselves elected to Congress. [Laughter.] We all know that mere politicians are never elected to anything. There are no politicians here. These are statesmen, all. [Laughter.]

It has been further said that if women vote, chivalry will go out of flower and never bloom again. Put it down, that kind of chivalry is spurious. When women vote they will receive more chivalrous attention than ever, for they will have added to their amiability, beauty, and intelligence the charm of power. This day's work has shown the splendor of the advance of the cause of equal rights. Men differ as to the channel through which it shall come, but there have been few discordant notes to mar the high conceptions that move the membership of the House; indeed, only one exposed the dimensions of his prejudice through the indulgence of his descriptive genius.

The first real thing in constitutions went into effect on April 30, 1789, just 14 years and 11 days after its founders and makers began to cut down the timbers at Lexington, in Massachusetts, April 19, 1775.

It was and is the greatest of civic productions, for while its expression illustrates the primacy, dimensions, and power of its conceptions, its operation has shown its adaptability, utility, and efficiency in the just government of men.

The very word "constitution" was hateful to those who controlled affairs in that and preceding ages.

It meant too much of definiteness and clarity as to the rights and security of the people, and it infringed and exposed the vagaries of irresponsible power, which thrives best where ignorance is dense and general and morals are low.

Since then physical remoteness and slow communication have been overcome by discovery and invention, so that now every part of the Republic is nearer every other part than one part of a single county was to most parts of the same county a century and a quarter ago, although our territorial extent has multiplied many times; and we are homogeneous as well as nu-

merical, regardless of intervening rivers, mountains, plains, and even oceans.

No questionable act of government can now be done that will not be known by everybody, everywhere, practically within the hour.

Publicity in civics is the guardian angel of free institutions.

Despotism can not bear the light, its littleness and meanness shrivel and wither under the gaze of modern intelligence and moral sensibility.

Local self-government is as useful and necessary as the succession of the seasons and the procession of the celestial planets, but

Centralization in the eighteenth century was a most different thing than centralization in the twentieth century; indeed, even austere and conservative men, as well as the mercurial opportunist, now speak with a complacency approaching enthusiasm of the parliament of man, the federation of the world.

The proposed amendment does not contemplate the repression or restriction of the rights and the power of the people; on the contrary it seeks to sensitize and extend them.

Men have been about the sole artificers in the construction and conduct of government, and there is now on exhibition, with Europe as the stage and a horrified world as the audience, the superlative illustration of the bleeding and burning handiwork of men.

Men are slow either to yield or to divide power, but then, in extenuation or mitigation, it must justly be said they are swift to add to that which they have. It has always been that way; the memory of man runneth not to the contrary.

This has held up progress and has stood in the way of the prevalence of equal rights.

Some brave and true men started the evolution of our Government, and they pushed it along and forward and upward with the utmost pains, patience, faith, and courage.

They had no model, but they had clear minds, far sight, and high purpose. They laid it out on lines that would expand and respond to facts and ideas as they should become known. They did not set much store by the Medo-Persian law "that changeth not."

They knew that power must be kept near the hands of the people or it would be abused, and yet that it must be put beyond the reach of temporary popular frenzy.

That is why they said it would need two-thirds of the House and two-thirds of the Senate to formulate and set in motion any change in the Constitution for submission to the States.

They also had abiding confidence that intelligent, sensitive, and honorable men formulating an amendment, upon petition or otherwise, that would vitally affect the rights and the happiness of the people, would see to it that so great an issue should not be made the butt of arbitrary or vacillating official dictum.

They did not intend that the agent always and not the principal should pronounce the owner's ultimate will, for they knew the sacred story of "the hands of Esau, but the voice of Jacob."

A petition implies there is one who needs that which another can give.

Esther, the queen, knew Ahasuerus, the king, could give or take anything within his dominions of one hundred and seven

and twenty provinces. She knew also that if her petition were not received with favor her life was forfeit, but she preferred her petition and saved her people.

Daniel was a mighty supplicator, who made his petition three times each day, and he had such wisdom bestowed upon him that he was the profoundest interpreter and wisest counselor of that or any age.

John of England had a poor ear for petitions. He could see no reason for them, nor could he comprehend their importance until the radiance of the daggers of his barons at Runnymede, 700 years ago, come June next, illuminated his sluggish intellect and taught him that there are human rights which even a king can neither dissipate nor deny.

The American colonists complained that the right of petition was denied them and their wrongs were ignored. They published their lamentations in the form of a declaration, denouncing the sovereign and the sovereignty that refused to hear them; then they flung the king and his scepter into the sea, and when they had assuaged their indignation they wrote and put into force a Constitution, in which they embalmed the sacred right of petition, and they made sure and ample provision for the amendment of the Constitution whenever the light of experience should reveal that it ought to be done.

More American citizens than all the people that lived in this land when that Constitution was proclaimed are now asking the Congress to set in motion the process provided in that great instrument to promote their welfare by broadening their constitutional guaranties, and to that end to enlarge the suffrage by amendment of the Federal Constitution.

Shall the Congress, like the king whom they therefore abolished, refuse to hear them?

There is no function in the all-pervading power of Congress that so vividly illustrates its dignity as its dominance of the form and substance of any and all amendments to the Constitution.

The fundamental law of the Republic can not be adjusted to the light of modern evolution if the Congress is not in step with the progress of the age.

The people may see visions and they may dream dreams, but these can not fructify if the Congress sees fit to interpose its interceptive dictum.

But with power goes responsibility, and the abuse of the one or the neglect of the other will invite swift retribution.

There is not one among us who does not know that the strength of the Republic is derived from the intelligence of the people, and that if our institutions are to endure that strength must be cultivated and utilized.

It follows logically that it is eminently due and pertinent that the Congress should inquire whether the average intelligence of our electoral expression would be lowered if women voted;

Whether the refinement of qualification to vote, as it now obtains, would be degraded if our wives and daughters were brought within its purview;

Whether because one person does not care to vote is a good reason why another person should not be allowed to vote;

Whether it raises an inscrutable question of mental atrophy for one to say he or she is indifferent to the right of franchise;

Whether there is a single instance of any in the quick and not of the dead who does not desire to control his or her own property and to have the right to provide by law for the security of life, liberty, and honor; and

Whether, if this is an age of counsel and progress, of facilitation and celerity, and of adjustment and sensitiveness to the rights of others, it is reasonable to express amazement, criticism, or resentment when constitutionally recognized citizens of the Republic ask to be admitted to the right of franchise.

Such a petition is permeated and attended with all the muniments of dignity.

It conveys the express will of the sovereign to those deputed to perform the functions of subordinate legislation, to formulate and facilitate the purpose to have submitted to the States and thereby their electors the question whether the right of franchise shall be enlarged.

The issue is by no means confined to whether the Members of Congress personally favor the extension of the franchise, but whether the States shall be denied or confirmed in their power to say what shall be the constitutional rights of American citizens.

The right of suffrage is as old as the human race. It is the bedrock upon which the sovereignty of the people rests; its denial is the act, the trick, the subterfuge of the usurper, and it is now wholly forbidden only within the pale of despotism.

It was the refusal of a voice in affairs that drove our ancestors into rebellion against the King and that justified them to themselves in the destruction of private property as their only means of audibly expressing their indignation against injustice; and it was that same wrong that thrust monarchy from the land of the setting sun.

What do the women of this country seek? Is it anything more than their fathers wrung from the crown by the bloody assize of war?

Do they ask for pensions, for preferences, for special privileges, or is it only for a fair field and no favor in the struggle for existence?

If it is true that half of the adult people of the United States have no voice in making the laws under which they live nor adjusting the revenues to which they must contribute, how do we account for our slogan of "Equal rights to all, special privileges to none"?

We have always declared in words that glitter and gleam, "Taxation without representation is usurpation," and yet we deny to women a single word in making the rates and levies through which we compel them to pay hundreds of millions in taxes annually.

Our duplicity outshines our consistency, overmasters our delicacy, and obliterates the last vestige of justice.

The smallest discernible object on earth is the man who boasts dominion over his wife's property.

At what jocund time, in what roseate place, and by what sinuous and sinister means did man acquire the right to violate every rubric of the square deal and to play the small despot?

We laud the Declaration of Independence and point with the scintillating glamor of pride to the fervid arraignment of the king "for imposing taxes on us without our consent," and then proceed to perpetrate the same tyranny on those most dear to us. We place a celestial halo upon the brow of the king by comparison.

Was not that world-convulsing document written by the hands and sanctified by the blood of our common forbears?

Where lies the keener intelligence and the major devotion of the human race?

Are these virtues luminously conspicuous and decorative only in the personality of those who now possess and parade the inestimable power of the franchise?

It is a matter of common knowledge, and no less of pride and satisfaction, that the minds and manners of the rising generation are largely formed and trained by women; and this is neither artificial nor abnormal, but on the contrary it is natural, spontaneous, and beneficial, for there is neither light nor the suggestion of betterment that women are not swift to discern, appreciate, and diffuse. And if this is true, why should we seek to deprive the Republic of the intuitive, subtle, intellectual strength of this boundless source of service?

Are the circumscriptions of the political influence of women to be the proof not only of the survival of prejudice but of its most obstructive culmination?

Is prejudice an illuminant; is it an embellishment?

Does custom sanctify imbecility?

Of whom here that has utility—real, fructifying mentality—has it not been asked, "Who is his mother?" not "Who is his father?"

For ages the firmament has been vocal with applause, the pages of history aflame with eulogy of her foresight, her judgment, and her triumphs.

Would we have exemplifications of her world work?

Who, then, had the prescience to consciously know and the courage of conviction to supply the means to lift the veil from this continent?

Was it Ferdinand of Aragon—the King, the man—or was it Isabella of Castile—the Queen, the woman?

Who drove the invader from France, restored her cities, and reestablished her sovereignty? Was it Charles VII—the King, the man—or was it Joan of Arc, the maid of Domremy?

Was it Francis of Lorraine, Emperor consort, her husband, or was it Maria Theresa herself who rescued Austria-Hungary from the clutches of her insatiable military neighbors and saved the realms of the House of Hapsburg?

The instances of the genius of women for affairs of government are numberless as the stars.

In the cabinet, in the field, in art, in science, in literature, in philosophy, who denies the transcendent intellectual power of women?

Aside from the equities, is it wise to debar this limitless influence, this matchless intelligence from participation in the elucidation of the problems of the Republic?

Like the surging roar of the sounding sea comes the ceaseless and swelling demand that we shall gravely consider the relation of this majestic potentiality to the future of our country.

Is the lurid exhibition of discourtesy and hoodlunism on Pennsylvania Avenue a year ago to be the gauge and guerdon of American civilization?

Has it come to such a pass that it is necessary not only that women should have the franchise, but that they should bear arms to protect themselves from those who are now clothed with the royal right to vote?

Election day is a sovereign day, and should be made a day of sacramental dignity and solemnity.

Shall not our own flesh and blood serve with us at this altar of honor and power?

Who ever increased his estate or enhanced his happiness by subjecting either to the animadversions of a courtier?

Who does not know that over-sweet words make bitter lives?

Paens of adulation, compliment, and admiration are delectable, but they are not dependable; they fade like the mists of the morning in times of stress.

Laws made by those who must live under them and sustain them are the only safe refuge in the mutations of human affairs.

We talk of the good red blood in our veins; is the proof of the color of our personal ichor established by our denial of equal rights to others?

Is it just, magnanimous, or honorable to refuse to others that which we demand for ourselves?

Only unreal men titter and sneer at those who have the splendid courage to try to dissipate prejudice, establish justice, and make an end of a hideous wrong.

Are we conscious of the throb of modernity in civilization?

Was the just, the wise, the martyr, Abraham Lincoln mad when he said: "I go for all who bear arms or who pay taxes, to be admitted to the franchise, by no means excluding females"?

The issue is fundamental, shall it be postponed by the exertion of the procrastinating power of the House, or shall we rend this ragged remnant of the mantle of despotism from our unwilling shoulders?

Shall we, like the king, refuse to hear the petition?

A tumultuous call is clanging from the hills and sobbing from the valleys for equal rights to all.